

# ELECTRONIC SPORT: HOW PRO-GAMING NEGOTIATES TERRITORIAL BELONGING AND GENDER

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*Abstract: The article explores the phenomenon of electronic sport (e-sport), which refers to organised and competitive video gaming. It is approached as a 'social world' and a specific culture of gaming, which produces organised groups, events and broadcasting. Located at the intersection of gaming and sports, e-sport adopts elements from both areas. From a grounded theory perspective, the article discusses the contexts, meanings and practices of pro-gaming within e-sport as researched in a study consisting of semi-structured interviews with e-sport fans, gamers, journalists and team managers and observation of e-sport events and clubhouses. The results point out that territorial belonging and gender remain relevant for pro-gaming. Both can inspire belonging and result in exclusions or inclusions. But while territorial belonging is adopted as a flexible practice, gender is structuring gaming within e-sport.*

*Keywords: pro-gaming, gender, territoriality, e-sport, negotiation, social form*

Electronic sport (e-sport) refers to organised and competitive video gaming. The relatively young phenomenon can be dated back to the end of the 1990s when the first online gaming leagues<sup>1</sup> emerged. Up to then, public gaming took place offline using a Local Area Network (LAN) at so-called LAN-parties or LAN-events<sup>2</sup>. In 2008, 78 countries were represented at the World Cyber Games (WCG) and participants competed for a total of \$470,000 of prize money. Examples of popular e-sport games are the first person shooter *Counter-strike 1.6* and the real-time strategy game *Warcraft 3*. E-sport is neither restricted to one game nor to one game genre, but unites various gaming communities.

In addition, e-sport, like traditional sport, is not only about competitions and athletes, but is also about audiences, fans and broadcasting. Within e-sport, a passion for games and competitive gaming is not exclusively expressed through competing. E-sport fans cheer for their favourite teams at events and watch broadcasted matches online. Others take part in e-sport by working in not yet salaried positions such as team managers, 'shout-casters' providing play-by-play commentary or editors-in-chief. Ambitious gamers follow

their passion by taking part in organised competitions and by becoming pro-gamers (professional gamers who via contract, receive regular financial support from a team). As pro-gamers, players not only compete for prize money, sponsoring and media attention but also for fan support and social status.

By approaching e-sport as an emerging cultural and social formation, the relationship between mediated communication and culture can be examined. From this perspective, e-sport cannot be reduced to a particular gaming activity but refers to a whole “social world” (Shibutani, 1955; Strauss, 1978) of shared practices, contexts and meanings. Within this social world, media take a threefold role: as *sports* (to perform and to compete through gaming); as *infrastructure* (to meet and to compete online); and as *broadcaster* (to be informed and entertained as audience). Hence, media provides both content and form of e-sport.

In order to examine the role of media for e-sport, this article concentrates on professional gaming (pro-gaming) because it is a central media practice of e-sport. The term ‘media practice’ refers to “media-oriented practices” (Couldry 2004, p.121). Hence, these practices go beyond consumption practices. An analysis of media practices promises new insights into what people *do*, *say* and *think* in relation to media (Couldry 2004). By using semi-structured interviews with e-sport fans, gamers, journalists and team managers and observation of e-sport events and clubhouses, the article will discuss the findings of an empirical study based on the principles of grounded theory. The analysis points out that the way pro-gaming is understood, contextualised and practiced within e-sport needs to be framed within a broader social context of territoriality and gender. Whereas territorial belonging does not organise all contexts of pro-gaming, dominant gender relations are structuring pro-gaming.

#### INTRODUCING CENTRAL CONCEPTS:

##### SOCIAL FORM, MEDIA PRACTICE, TERRITORIALITY AND GENDER

Mediated communication is understood here as a specific form of human action. It is not reduced to the transport of information, but conceptualised as a complex process of meaning-making which is situated in cultural and social contexts. The use of media is not understood as functionalistic but as integrated in our everyday life and in our specific cultural situation.

Mediated communication, understood as a form of human action, points out that media gain relevance through human actions, which refer to media (Krotz, 2009 p.26). In order to research what people do, say and think in relation to media, it is productive to analyse their “media-oriented practices” (Couldry 2004, p.121). Media practices help us to understand that different spaces and practices exist in relation to media and that different meanings can be given to one media text (e.g. one video game). To approach e-sport from this perspective allows moving beyond the analysis of reception and production of games. The analysis presented here concentrates on how pro-gaming is socially organised through practices (of constructing gaming squads, contexts<sup>3</sup> and game play) and how these practices produce (and reproduce) social relations. To focus on media practices helps to grasp what people are actually doing with games and what social arena gaming produces.

The term ‘social form’ is used as an open and process-oriented concept for researching social relationships (e.g. groups, networks, communities), which produce meaning and are based on a feeling of belonging. Gender and territorial belonging represent two aspects, which can inspire belonging and result in inclusions/exclusions. According to Hitzler (1995, p.160) and Beck (1997, p.91) new social forms are able to overcome social classifications such

as class or gender. Whereas traditional communities were linked to central institutions of society, such as the king or the pope, modern social forms produce increasingly independent systems of meaning (Luckmann, 1978, pp.276-279). They can become independent from society's central institutions and from their stabilising gender constructions (Hitzler et al., 2005, p.36). These forms are also said to have less clear expectations towards their participants and therefore to be more open concerning the experiences participants can gain (Hitzler et al., 2005, p.37). For these reasons, new social forms are understood as having the potential to dissolve traditional gender roles (Hitzler et al., 2005, p.36).

In addition, social forms are increasingly relying on media for communicating to each other, for organising gatherings, for sharing experiences, and so on. As a consequence, these forms seem to be less bound by territory and more by communication (see Shibutani, 1955, p. 566). This transgression of boundaries can be conceptualised as communicative deterritorialisation (Hepp, 2002, pp.867-874). For example, online communication combined with gaming practices can encourage new social forms such as online gaming groups, which represent deterritorialised forms of belonging. John Tomlinson (2000, p.148) emphasises that "[w]here there is deterritorialization there is also reterritorialization". According to him the process of reterritorialisation involves "various attempts to re-establish a cultural 'home'" (Tomlinson, 2000, p.148). Beck (2002, p.29), on the other hand, suggests distinguishing between "national manifestation" and "cosmopolitan reality" in order to emphasise that our experiential space no longer corresponds with national space. Thus, we have to ask if a recontextualisation of gaming within local settings already points to the process of building a new cultural home as suggested by Tomlinson (1999) or if it is merely a national manifestation of cosmopolitan reality.

As media offer new experiential spaces, which do not only cross territories but also transgress cultural boundaries (Hepp, 2002, pp. 867-874), the question arises whether as a result of the cultural transgression these emerging spaces are constructed through new cultural meanings, practices and contexts and whether they are able to challenge previous cultural constructions such as traditional gender roles.

Moi (2001) understands gender as a central classification which structures the entire social field and therefore cannot be so easily overcome. She suggests conceptualising it in a similar way as Bourdieu (1998, p.32) understands class. She stresses that gender is "a particularly *combinatory* social category, one that infiltrates and influences every other category" (Moi, 2001, p.288, emphasis in original). The power of gender becomes visible as soon as gender actions such a structuring force. Following Butler (1988, p.525) gender is conceptualised as a performance constituted through acts, which refer to "a shared experience and 'collective action'". This conceptualisation points out that gender constitutes not merely an individual act. Hence, gender could also be understood as a shared practice. Media offer a space for communicative action where gender can be (re)constructed but also deconstructed. Therefore, gender is not understood here as a *force* which automatically structures mediated communication, but as a practice which can be performed through mediated communication and which can structure other social practices.

In summary, the article approaches e-sport as a new social form and focuses on the aspect of territoriality and gender. The analysis of media practices promises new insights into the role of media and how gaming is practiced, contextualised and understood with regard to social classifications.

The research takes into consideration that what constitutes a media practice depends on people understanding a set of actions as a distinct practice. It is not the researcher who decides what a media practice is and how it is socially organised. The aim is to develop a theory about competitive and organised gaming by relying on data and not on closed theoretical systems or meta-theories from which explanations for empirical contexts are deduced. Grounded theory is an adequate methodology because this methodological approach promises to arrive at a theory derived from the data (Krotz, 2005, p.169; Corbin and Strauss 1998, p.12).

From 2008 to 2010 data was collected using qualitative interviews, participant and non-participant observation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three team managers (labelled D, U, W), five professional gamers (labelled A, G, N, P, S), four e-sport fans (labelled K, L, M, R) and two e-sport journalists (labelled T, B). Interview respondents were initially contacted via e-mail, and then interviewed face-to-face within an e-sport context (event, boot camp, clubhouse) in order to gain additional insight into the context. After face-to-face interviews the interview partners were contacted again via e-mail in order to clarify remaining questions.

Offline observation was chosen as an additional method because it allows gaining insights into the contexts interview partners referred to during their interviews. Moreover, it enables the researcher to note actions and practices that interview partners are not aware of. During the events, the researcher took part in all activities offered to visitors without concealing the research interest.

Participant observation took place at three e-sport events: one national (E-sport Professional Series, 2009) and two international events (World Cyber Games, 2008 and the E-sport World Cup, 2010). Additional non-participant observations occurred at steady offline representations of two professional teams. Observing and interviewing always informed each other. Observations helped to contextualise interviews and gain insights at the relevant practices. The observations also contributed to the set of questions posed during the semi-structured interviews.

The chosen methodology demands that data collection and analysis should continually inform each other (Corbin and Strauss, 1998, p. 201). Preliminary knowledge and the research question helped to choose the first interview partners and observations. The gained insights informed the next sample of data. With the help of this 'theoretical sampling' (Corbin and Strauss 1998, p.203), interview partners and observations were chosen more and more selectively in order to contrast previous data, but also in order to test early theory fragments. Concepts derived from the data such as 'territoriality' and 'gender' informed the selection of the next data sample. As a result, events for observation were varied according to gender (male and female league) and territoriality (national and international).

Interview transcriptions and observation protocols were at first open coded. Open coding (Corbin and Strauss 2008, pp.160) allows labelling, breaking down and comparing the data. The codes were derived from the data and then structured and organised around categories including 'recruitment practices', 'social connectivity', 'organisational structure' and 'professional training practices'. In a next step, axial coding (Corbin and Strauss 1998, p.229) was used to find out how categories relate to each other. For example it was tested if and how 'gender' relates to the category 'professional training practices'. Based on the relations found between categories, the next step was to construct a hierarchy of categories through selective coding (Corbin and Strauss 1998, p.143). As a result, it was possible to differentiate between different types of e-sport teams categorised as the 'company', 'the fam-

ily' and 'the interest group'. In addition, selective coding contributes to finding the "core category" (Corbin and Strauss 1998, p.146), which can be related to all other categories (Corbin and Strauss 1998, p.147). The results point out that the adopted 'social role' is responsible for how e-sport is experienced and practiced as a social form. To each role specific media practices, media contexts and meanings correspond. This article will concentrate on pro-gaming because it is a central media practice within e-sport. It does not only contribute to the construction of 'social roles' but also organises other e-sport practices (e.g. how game play is understood, how gaming squads are built).

#### E-SPORT GAMING: NEGOTIATING TERRITORIAL BELONGING

In order to understand pro-gaming within e-sport, it is necessary to look at the teams and events because they do not only pre-organise gaming within e-sport, but also offer relevant gaming contexts to the 'pro-gamer'. With regard to territorial orientation and connectivity we can differentiate between three types of teams. The 'family' adopts territorial belonging as identity and focuses on social ties within the team. The 'interest group' has a national orientation by anchoring itself within a city and tries to connect to central institutions of society. The 'company' represents a transnational orientation and focuses on connectivity with e-sport.

#### LOCAL, NATIONAL AND TRANSNATIONAL GAMING SQUADS

Within all three types of teams, the recruitment of professional gamers is not restricted to one territorial area. Teams unite gamers who belong to and are located in different countries. But for the 'family' to build local gaming squads remains desirable:

... on this level of performance, it does not work, this can be compared to the FC Bayern [professional football club] or others, they surely would play with eleven persons from Munich if they could, but it does not work like this<sup>4</sup>. (team manager, male U)

In addition to that, a desire for reterritorialisation is connected to a desire for the 'familiar' and for sharing more than only a passion for gaming:

Of course there are especially international clans [teams] which also sign up international gamers but I am not very enthusiastic about it because there are always language barriers and it is also a question of one's mindset. (team manager, male U)

Within the 'interest group' a steady offline representation is used to actually build local gaming squads where all members share one locality,

We really like to have gaming squads made up of Cologne residents who can really train here in the clubhouse, we did that for example with our Counter-strike Source squad. (team manager, male D)

However, when the team manager compares the local squad to other translocal squads, he understands the local one as less professional:

Some squads are more professional [...] that is what we realised with our Counter-strike Source squad, the squad from Cologne, during their training they were still chatting here and chatting

there, and there was a little bit more fun whereas our 1.6 [Counter-strike 1.6.] gaming squad, they are really training, they really close all messenger programmes and then they are intensely focused. (team manager, male D)

Unlike the 'family', the reason for building local gaming squads is not based on the desire to embody a territorial identity, but explained as a means for improving the social dimension of pro-gaming:

...so that they see each other not only online but also offline, as a result friendships are more likely to emerge and you can avoid problems much easier than by talking online without seeing each other, the respect also grows and the anonymity disappears when you sit across from each other. (team manager, male D)

The formation of local pro-gaming squads, however, still represents an exception within e-sport.

Moreover, territorial belonging also seems to be relevant for the e-sport events. But even though international events such as the ESWC (E-Sport World Cup) and the WCG (World Cyber Games) stage the battle of nations, from the point of view of the pro-gamer, being able to represent one's team can be more important than representing a nation:

You do not represent your team anymore at the World Cyber Games, at the ESWC you really play with your tricot [...] you really see that these six persons belong together, you do not see here [WCG] if they really play together in a team or not and I think that is much nicer at the ESWC. (pro-gamer, female G)

Concerning team-games, the national team is not newly formed, but represented by an already existing gaming squad. This practice has been established because

...to form a complete new gaming squad, that would, I believe, take a lot of more time than is given to you for preparing a tournament. (pro-gamer, male N)

As a result, it is not unusual that the national team is made up of gamers who come from different nations. For example the female gaming squad who won the ESWC 2010 represented Sweden at the tournament, but the gamers are from the USA and Canada. The team they belong to was originally founded in Germany but has offices in Germany and Sweden. Thus, gamers represent one nation, which is associated with their team.

#### *LOCAL, NATIONAL AND TRANSNATIONAL GAMING CONTEXTS*

Teams organise two types of offline gaming contexts, namely the 'boot camp' and the LAN. Whereas 'boot camps' offer a pro-gaming context for training purposes, LANs are understood as open-to-all gaming contexts which mainly offer 'leisure gaming'<sup>5</sup>. Within the context of a boot camp, one gaming squad meets offline but trains online with a training partner who usually does not share the same location. Thus, the boot camp represents a translocal gaming context. Within a LAN, however, gamers meet offline and play together within the local area network. In other words, they do not play online and everyone who plays also shares the same location.

For the 'family' LANs are seen as important because they help strengthen social ties between its members. Even the chosen organisational form is understood foremost as a means for facilitating these additional local gaming contexts:

When you play every day [online] with the same people, at some point you want to get to know them and so we organised our first LAN [Local Area Network] with 150 people and there you have of course income and expenses and you cannot deal with it other than through registering as club and non-profit association [in German: 'Verein'], that was the only reason why we did it [registering as club] back then. (Team manager, male U)

As the organisational form is understood primarily in terms of facilitating local gaming contexts, it becomes clear how important these contexts are for the 'family'.

Furthermore, the 'family' constructs offline pro-gaming contexts as 'homes' for the team. The identity of the team can be expressed through a regular appearance at a national e-sport event, which is located in the region with which the team identifies. The participation at this local gaming context is understood as the team's home match:

Our home match is Munich; of course we apply for Munich conventionally but we are ninety nine percent likely to get it. (team manager, male U)

Relatedly, the family-like social orientation is seen in the translocal gaming context of the boot camp, which is transformed from training and pro-gaming context into home:

I have been with many clans and nowhere were relations as family-like as with TBH [Team Bavaria Heaven] when you come here to the boot camp, you feel immediately like being at home. (pro-gamer, male A)

When compared to the other two types of teams, the 'family' presents a closed social form because it is primarily concerned with strengthening ties within the team and with people close to its members (e.g. family). Even though the 'family' and the 'interest group' share the same organisational form, they do not share the same territorial and social orientations. The 'family' has no political ambitions, whereas the 'interest group' actively promotes competitive gaming towards groups of territorialised cultures (e.g. Germany, Europe). Thus, the 'interest group' understands the organisational form of club and non-profit association as means for political action. One respondent named the common identifying interest which provides a basis for action as follows:

We have taken over a little bit, let's say: raising awareness for gaming in the public, even though, the ESB [E-Sport Bund, German e-sport association] exists, but it does not work so well at the moment. (team manager, male D)

Another respondent supported the statement and specified how the team tries to take action:

Lectures about violence prevention<sup>6</sup> are held here [in the clubhouse], workshops for the parents in order to involve the parents a little bit, the adults and the press and in order to say: if you are

interested in understanding, we give you the opportunity to gain insights. (pro-gamer, female G)

To have steady offline representation in the form of a clubhouse can be perceived as a national orientation, even when the team unites pro-gamers beyond one nation:

We have international ambitions with our professional teams, but also with our club teams, but contrary to let's say Mousesports or SK Gaming [two other teams] we really have a national focus with our clubhouse. (team manager, male D).

For the 'interest group' the clubhouse is understood as opening up new possibilities for interacting with groups and institutions beyond e-sport. Especially the possibility to situate gaming practices within local contexts such as the clubhouse are understood as attracting political and media attention from central institutions of territorialised cultures:

As a result of the clubhouse, we already had the mayor of Cologne as our guest at the opening ceremony, and the minister of media in Europe or something like that, and as a result we already received relative extensive media exposure. (team manager, male D)

Like the 'family', the 'interest group' attempts to connect to territorialised culture. Both teams are, however, representing different territorial orientations. According to Beck (2002, p.36), "[t]he difference between purely local and cosmopolitan forms of life is that cosmopolitans experience and – if necessary – defend their place as one open to the world." Although it seems questionable if 'purely local' forms exist, it could be argued that the 'family' at least *imagines* itself as a local form and desires reterritorialisation. It rejects parts of e-sport, such as transnational gaming squads by being "not very enthusiastic" about them. By contrary, the 'interest group' represents a cosmopolitan form because it defends its clubhouse as a place open to the deterritorialised world of e-sport as well as to central institutions of territorialised cultures (e.g. national government, national media).

The 'communicative deterritorialisation' (Hepp, 2002) of e-sport becomes particularly apparent when looking at the 'company'. Even though, this type of team has a steady offline representation in the form of an office, it is not used for regular meetings, but for sporadic training sessions, often in conjunction with being at the respective location for other reasons such as competitions. Contrary to the 'family' and the 'interest group', boot camps of the 'company' are not fixed to one specific locality. As training camps are usually held before major competitions, they take place at the location where the competition is held. Therefore, what distinguishes this type of team from the other two is not only its emphasised transnational orientation, but also the flexibility of its local gaming contexts. To have 'mobile' training camps that are not fixed to one location does not aim at constructing one location at the team's centre. In addition, the 'company' does not use these local gaming contexts in order to connect the team to territorialised cultures (e.g. nation or region). Instead, the use of mobile local contexts is able to link the team to the social world of gaming namely its events and competitions.

Pro-gamers within the 'company' type recognise mediated communication as their central means for communication:

In our team we are mostly online, we have a central office in Berlin, where we already played together [...] but we usually com-

municate via the internet. (pro-gamer, male P)

Nevertheless, it remains relevant for pro-gamers of this type of team to meet in off-line gaming contexts. If teams like the 'company' do not organise those contexts, gamers organise contexts themselves:

The girls all met at my house in Texas and we all hang out there and practiced all together for a week. (pro-gamer, female S)

As we have seen, within all three types of teams, offline gaming contexts are not only used by pro-gamers for training purposes, but also for deepening social relations ("to get to know them", "to hang out"). For a pro-gamer to share an offline context with other gamers does not constitute a regular (weekly or daily) media practice, but an occasional one. It is a media practice which makes it necessary that the dispersed gamers do not only share time but also place. Hence, media practices that are based on sharing locality cannot replace the translocal contexts of online communication and online gaming.

Another pro-gaming context is provided by e-sport events. Territorial belonging is relevant at international events such as the ESWC and the WCG for producing additional symbolic meaning. The WCG uses flag ceremonies to stage the battle of nations. This meaning is not central for participating in the event. Territorial belonging is only an additional element next to the games and the teams which are structuring the event. Participant observations and interviews at those events made clear that especially people new to the idea of e-sport and new to gaming used the presence of flags to understand that some kind of competition is performed. People participating in e-sport as 'pro-gamer', 'organiser' or 'fan' do not primarily make sense of the event as a battle of nations. For them the games, the teams and the gamers generate the meaning necessary to participate, as one e-sport-fan explains:

I am not so much interested in countries, but more in teams [...] actually, I am only following international teams, mTw, Alternate, yes, sometimes German gamers sometimes not, they [Alternate] also have a Swedish gamer, I believe, those [international teams] are interesting for 1.6 [Counter-strike 1.6] and Source [Counter-strike Source]. (e-sport fan, female L)

A pro-gamer supports this statement by saying:

It is not my aim to get to know persons from other games, but from my game I want to make contacts [...] the World Cyber Games is really a World Championship where people from all over the world come together, different cultures cross and I am allowed to see again a lot of people who live on a different part of the earth, with the young man from Singapore I was relatively often in contact, he used to be our guide back then in Singapore, he showed and explained everything and now it was the other way around so that we could show him and explain to him. (pro-gamer male P)

But when the favoured game is not represented, visitors can participate by following their national team:

Actually my main focus is Counter-strike Source which is not represented here [at the WCG] [...] so, it does not matter what

game, I play for Germany, I keep my fingers crossed for Germany. (e-sport fan male M)

To adopt territorial belonging allows creating symbolic links beyond the deterritorialised culture of e-sport. Flag ceremonies are especially able to tap into the symbolism of sports events. The celebratory use of elements such as clothes, flags and ceremonies to represent territorial belonging at e-sport events indicate some aesthetic value. But territorial belonging is not necessary for making sense of the e-sport competition.

Following Beck (2002, p.30) who recognises the “transformation of localities” as one central feature of globalisation, we can add that the specific social orientation of the team shapes its appropriation of locality and of offline gaming contexts. The ‘family’ adopts offline gaming contexts not as open to the world but as ‘home’ and as means for strengthening social ties within the team. The ‘interest group’ uses offline contexts for influencing central institutions of territorialised cultures as part of their political action. The ‘company’ constructs offline contexts which are able to connect to the deterritorialised culture of e-sport.

Media practices point to a ‘communicative deterritorialisation’ of pro-gaming squads and gaming contexts. Offline contexts such as boot camps are largely used for online gaming and translocal communication. Offline contexts facilitate occasional ‘offline’ meetings but to build local gaming squads remains an exception. E-sport itself mostly manifests itself online. Nevertheless, even for the deterritorialised culture of e-sport, territorial orientation can offer a discursive frame for creating a ‘home’ and an identity for the team, despite the ‘family’ uniting members beyond one region and one nation - not excluding members on the basis of territorial belonging. However, reterritorialisation and the rejection of deterritorialisation seem to remain a relevant desire and a means for imagining the team’s identity even when gaming cannot be restricted to territory but is still part of the deterritorialised world of e-sports. Thus, territorial belonging is exposed as an unstable cultural construction, as American gamers can represent Sweden on the basis of their belonging to a transnational organisation, which has offices in Sweden. Still, the territorial belonging staged at events is created through aesthetic value. To conclude, the processes of de- and reterritorialisation seem to make territorial belonging negotiable within e-sport.

#### E-SPORT GAMING: REINFORCING GENDER RELATIONS

Whereas territorial belonging seems to be negotiable, gender seems to structure pro-gaming. Gaming groups and contexts are organised along the gendered belonging of pro-gamers. Teams have male and female squads and leagues offer male and female competitions.

#### *FEMALE AND MALE GAME PLAY*

If sport constructs less able bodies for women, the biological argument is often dismissed in the context of e-sport. Game play is not understood as being directly linked to biology but as being dependent on knowledge and attitude. Nevertheless, e-sport constructs for female gamers a game play that is inferior when compared to male game play. The inferiority of female game play is explained by insinuating that female gamers have less gaming experience, knowledge and motivation than males. Even female pro-gamers construct female gamers as less dedicated and motivated:

There was only one female gamer who played at this high level of performance with male gamers, apart from that there are no women who were motivated to train so much and to dedicate

themselves so much to this game in order to get ahead of male gamers. (e-sport pro-gamer, female G)

In addition, professional team play is understood as having two interdependent dimensions, a 'social-orientated' and a 'game-orientated' dimension. The 'social' dimension refers to the emotional relationship between the gamers. It describes their ability to bond or to become friends with each other. We have already seen that the social dimension is strongly connected to sharing a local gaming context. The 'game' dimension refers to the gaming relation between the gamers. It describes how well they play together as a group. Both dimensions are interdependent and expressed through mediated communication. Both are concerned with qualities of communication and both are gendered.

Feminine game play is associated with the social dimension of gaming which reproduces gender stereotypes of women being more caring as opposed to being competitive. Thus, the social relationships among squad members, but also among team members, are understood as being more important to female gamers:

With females you have to have that bond inside and outside the game, I think it helps tremendously for female gamers if you create a bond outside of the game and come into the game together and you are all working together for one goal. (pro-gamer, female S)

Female gamers are constructed as valuing the social dimension more than the pro-gaming context of the organised competition. This central discourse is produced by websites informing about and discussing e-sport, but is also reproduced in interviews. It manifests itself, for example, in the understanding of how female gamers refuse to accept the official decision of a league and the resulting suspension of a tournament:

A female gamer was excluded from the competition by the ESL [E-Sport League] because of cheating and all the other teams did object [...] they [the teams] said, "we want to reconsider the exclusion, the finals of our championship are about to start and we demand that the finals are postponed". The ESL said, "no, we won't postpone and reconsider", so they [the teams] said, "OK, then we play the finals without you". So, the female gaming scene is small but there is also a great solidarity. (team manager, male D)

In fact, the four finalists, including the expelled team member, played the play-offs of the Deutsche Female Meisterschaft 2009 (DFM, German Female Major Series) between themselves and without the administrators of the league. Even though, male gamers also joined the protest against the league, the incident was interpreted as an indicator for the sociality of female gamers.

In contrast to female game play, male game play is understood as the ability to work well together without having to be best friends:

You can get five guys together from any team put them together and they can play, just play the game, they are able to do that, you know, even if they haven't practiced together, they all know what they can do, they all know their role, with women it is a little bit different and I am not sure why [...] but with females

you have to have that bond inside and outside the game. (pro-gamer female S)

Thus, females are constructed as more socially-oriented than game-oriented when compared to male gamers.

The hierarchy between male and female game play becomes particularly apparent in the construction of 'Counter-strike' and 'Counter-strike Women'. 'Counter-strike Women' refers to the game 'Counter-strike' being competitively played by female gamers. The relation between the gendered gaming practices is hierarchical because male game play understood as 'Counter-strike' is rendered into the universal and central gaming practice when compared to 'Counter-strike Women'. A hierarchy of gender practices is, thus, achieved through assigning the universal meaning to male and the particular to female practices. The same logic is applied in sports where terms such as for example 'football', 'soccer' or 'athlete' is used for referring to men and men's sports but 'women' or 'female' is added when referring to women or women's sports.

The hierarchy of gender practices can also be grasped when gaming contexts are understood as being less professional because they offer 'Counter-strike Women':

Altogether there are less women who play, so it is easier to achieve a professional level within female gaming and that is the reason why the WCG [World Cyber Games] are more professionally orientated, they offer these games which have really stood the test of time, thus, there is only Counter-strike 1.6, at the ESWC [E-Sport World Cup] there is also Counter-strike Zero and Counter-strike Women which the World Cyber Games exclude. (pro-gamer, female G)

The statement shows that Counter-strike played competitively by female gamers is not only constructed as a different game than Counter-strike, but is also associated with being inferior. As female gamers could theoretically compete within 'Counter-strike', 'Counter-strike Women' is considered unnecessary. To understand a separate space for females as redundant and unnecessary represents a central discourse within e-sport. The discourse is produced within the male dominated user discussions of central e-sport websites, but also reproduced by interview partners:

The community criticises it [female gaming] because everyone is saying that different bodies do not make a difference during gaming, so if they [female gamers] want game, then they should compete against men. (e-sport journalist, male T)

The quote indicates that this discourse is based on the idea that contrary to physical sports there is no need to separate between male and female athletes/gamers<sup>7</sup>. But, as we have seen, e-sport already constructs a system of differentiation which produces gendered gaming experience, skills and motivation. Thus, once female gaming is abolished, it is anticipated that female gamers too will disappear within pro-gaming because they are under-

FEMALE AND MALE GAMING CONTEXTS

E-sport offers a range of gendered gaming contexts for pro-gaming. The imagination, however, that one day pro-gaming could be practiced in mixed leagues still exists:

I think one day, I think there will be mixed leagues, but not for a very long time there is just, it is just impossible right now. But one day, once female gamers are viewed as just gamers, not female then there can be mixed leagues. (pro-gamer, female S)

The quote makes clear that the relationship between the construction of gamers and gaming contexts is understood as interdependent. In other words, gendered gaming contexts produce gendered gamers and the other way around.

Even though female gaming contexts are constructed as inferior, they can be perceived as safe from gender discriminations:

When you go online as a female gamer it is just very uncomfortable, you are surrounded by trolls, males that are out to get you, it is not very comfortable, but tournaments like this ESWC [eSport World Cup] allows female gamers to come out and to be comfortable in a tournament and play and really feel what the males have been feeling for years and years. (pro-gamer, female S)

We can see that offline gaming contexts which offer females a separate tournament space are preferred to online gaming contexts.

To play games such as Counter-strike as a gendered girl in a competitive way and within a male dominated culture of gaming could be read as a practice of resistance. By participating in a gaming culture, which is constructed as male, female gamers seem to transgress into male gaming spaces. Viewed from outside of e-sport, this transgression could be understood as a possibility of rejecting dominant constructions of femininity by participating in masculine practices and contexts. However, as we have seen within e-sport, female gamers are constructed as different to male gamers. By emphasising looks over sporting skill and expertise, the position of 'emphasised femininity' (Connell, 2003) is constructed for female gamers. As a result, female gamers are constructed like female athletes as overly feminine and heterosexual. But female gamers can also identify with meanings of femininity, which are less compliant with the gender hierarchy. The female professional gamer S. contrasts various meanings of femininity within pro-gaming as following:

You have your group of pretty girls with nice earrings, their hair is perfect and make up and they are here to look pretty and play and you have the girls that are here, they are screaming and they don't care what they look like and they are just like, yeah let's win. (pro-gamer, female S)

Even though female gamers are confronted with meanings of femininity which are based on emphasising looks over gaming skills, female gamers can expand these boundaries and identify with attitudes and practices which are at the margin of what appears to be femininity.

Still, within e-sport, female gamers are linked and associated with commercialised

and de-professionalised gaming contexts and practices which further their deprived status within the established gender hierarchy. The process of commercialisation, hence, contributes to reinforcing gender hierarchies.

So called 'show matches' embody the heterosexual and 'emphasised femininity' which according to Connell (2003, p.183-188) is not only complicit in sustaining hegemonic masculinity, but is also *performed* for men. 'Show matches' are competitions which are staged at the exhibition stands of hardware and software companies:

Here [World Cyber Games 2008] there is also an exhibition stand of for example Thermaltake [hardware manufacturer], they have their own female squad here and then they invite another female squad for playing show matches, where, put simply, women play against each other in order to attract visitors and that is usually easier done using women than using men. (pro-gamer, female G)

The statement makes clear that so-called show matches are not understood as part of the official tournaments but as part of the marketing strategy of team sponsors. The purpose of show matches is attracting attention and potential male customers to an exhibition stand of a sponsor during an event. Unlike official tournaments, these gaming contexts are not based on prior qualifications and do not lead to qualification for other competitions or titles. They are outside of the professionalised league systems. Show matches demonstrate how heterosexual<sup>8</sup> emphasised femininity and the commodification of women's bodies are interwoven. As a result, discourses within e-sport dismiss female gamers as 'marketing dolls'. Such a construction of female gamers further undermines the status of female gaming:

You see them [female gamers] as marketing dolls, even if this sounds derogative, but that is how the community sees them as well and why the community does not take them seriously. (e-sport journalist male T)

Female gamers are often absent as athletes within e-sport competitions, which are officially gender-neutral but implicitly male gaming contexts. Instead, and as a result of the process of commercialisation, they are used as marketing tools in gaming contexts such as show matches and promotion tours. Their role as athletes is, hence, threatened by these commercialised and de-professionalised gaming contexts. Moreover, their role as athletes is confined to explicitly feminine and female-only contexts, which are constructed as the gaming context for the less-able gamer.

Another practice of 'othering' is the 'implantation' of female squads within male dominated league systems. As it is possible to change members after a squad has qualified for the E-sport Professional League (EPS), gamers can take part within this league without prior qualification. The company team Snogard Dragons took advantage of this structure and exchanged their male gamers after their qualification for female gamers in order to generate attention within e-sport. The company team provided the only female squad within the history of the EPS. This 'implantation' of female gamers for marketing purposes received intense online discussions. The idea that female gamers are offered gaming opportunities because they are more marketable than males is a central discourse within e-sport which also helps to trivialise the performance of female gamers.

To choose the members of a gaming squad primarily in order to generate media attention and not in order to win the competition also shows how commercialisation already

subverts the win-loss principle of the sport ideology. Commercialisation could thus be understood as reinforcing gender as a structuring practice. In other words, sponsors and teams primarily understand female gamers as a marketing instrument:

It [female gaming] is a big issue for our partners and sponsors, Intel sponsored our female squad last year and sent them to Egypt; gaming events were held there and five blond girls came from Germany and kicked ass in a computer game, so we actually used this for publicity. (team manager, male D)

This bias is accepted even by female gamers because sponsors are the only organisations which support e-sport financially and therefore their activities are legitimised:

Even though some girls are here just for marketing purposes only and they may not have that much skill, it is still a win-win for gamers because even though some guys can see it and be jealous and say why did they get to go if they are not that good, it is still a win-win because sponsors are still putting money out into the gaming world." (pro-gamer, female S)

To summarise, gender is adopted as a *structuring* practice concerning pro-gaming within e-sport. Gamers are constructed and understood through gendered gaming practices and contexts, which together form a gendered hierarchy. Within this hierarchy female gamers are associated with inferior game play and de-professionalised gaming contexts that are reduced to marketing purposes.

## CONCLUSION

This article has shown how e-sport negotiates gender and territoriality by examining contexts, meanings and practices of pro-gaming. Even though gaming contexts are extended into offline contexts, they are not necessarily *structured* by territorial belonging. Their reality remains a "cosmopolitan reality" (Beck, 2002), which is sustained through local and translocal communication. Territorial belonging within e-sport is transformed into a *flexible* practice. Thus, it has lost its structuring properties and becomes negotiable. As we've seen, it also becomes an aesthetic practice for constructing tournament spaces.

E-sport represents an emerging social form, which is 'cosmopolitan' in the sense that it is open to the world. As a result, gamers are not only able to participate but also to represent a country or a team independent from their territorial belongings. The only boundary seems to be mediated communication because as long as it is possible to game and to communicate, it seems possible to participate. E-sport therefore represents a 'social world' in the sense of Shibutani (1955, p. 566) because "boundaries [...] are set neither by territory nor by formal group membership but by the limits of effective communication". We can emphasise that e-sport is limited primarily by *mediated* communication.

But even within the deterritorialised world of e-sport, territorial belonging still remains an imagination, a desire and a discursive frame for some teams. Processes of reterritorialisation and a desired nationalisation of e-sport namely the integration into national culture through the recognition of central institutions of society (e.g. national government, national media) are also part of political activities. In addition, territorial belonging can be negotiated differently compared to other social worlds. In contrast to sport, the territorial belonging of the e-sport athletes are understood as less important when compared to the adopted belonging of the organisation they represent. Finally, social forms within e-sport

can reject the 'cosmopolitan reality' of e-sport and imagine themselves through territorial belonging.

New social forms like e-sport are able to transgress cultural boundaries, to exist across society's institutions and to build independent systems of meaning. As a result, they are often argued to have the potential to overcome certain social classifications such as gender. But contrary to these theories, we have seen that gender remains relevant to e-sport. Whereas the relevance of territorial belonging can be negotiated for pro-gaming contexts, practices and groups, the same cannot be said for gender. Despite the potential that follows from the reduced significance of physical differences in e-sport, e-sport reproduces dominant gender discourses. Game play of females is understood as different and less professional than that of males. Whilst in traditional sports, physical differences are used for differentiating men from women, in e-sport communicative differences (concerning self-discipline, competitive spirit and sociality within gaming) structure gender differences.

The gendering of gaming also becomes apparent in commercialised and de-professionalised gaming contexts, which disconnect female gamers from pro-gaming. Female and male pro-gamers are constructed differently. Female gamers are either hidden within e-sport (in online spaces which are male dominated) or made hyper-visible (in de-professionalised or explicit female gaming spaces). The commercialised hyper-visibility of female gamers can be understood as a variation of 'emphasised femininity' (Connell, 2003) because it is complicit in constructing a gender hierarchy.

Female gamers also reproduce the hierarchy of gendered gaming. From the perspective of female gamers, female-only gaming groups and contexts then become a double-edged sword. They can be perceived as safe gaming environments compared to male dominated online gaming contexts. But they also can be experienced as the only option to participate in e-sport as a female and as an option that is less socially valued than other gaming contexts.

By looking at gender we are also made aware that apart from teams, events and central websites sponsors also have symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1989) within e-sport. For example, within e-sport it is accepted that sponsors who represent business companies have a bias towards female gamers. The acceptance of de-professionalised and commercialised gaming spaces as a 'win-win' situation demonstrates how symbolic power is interwoven with commercialisation. Sponsors within e-sport receive the political power of institutions, namely the power "to impose and to inculcate a vision of divisions, that is, the power to make visible and explicit social divisions" (Bourdieu, 1989, p.23). Bourdieu (1989, p. 23) refers to such a power as "political power par excellence". Hence, organised competitive gaming does not take place in a social-political vacuum. It is situated within a social world which is based on existing interdependencies and power relations.

Thus, if we want to understand the gendering of gaming and how gaming produces social divisions, it is productive to look beyond the game. Gaming cannot be fully understood by looking at games in isolation. Hence, more research examining how games are practiced and contextualised within social and cultural situations is needed.

To conclude, the way media are used, contextualised and understood within e-sport construct a new media practice: pro-gaming. This media practice renegotiates local, national and transnational orientations, but is structured by traditional gender relations. Pro-gaming then seems to represent a 'cosmopolitan sport' par excellence. Especially when considering that the term "cosmopolitan" has been gendered as "man of the world" (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 187). Hence, gaming and especially pro-gaming deserve our critical attention because these media practices are central to emerging social worlds where new media discourses and

practices are produced and existing social hierarchies are contested as well as reproduced.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 For example the United Kingdom Clan League (UKCL) founded in 1996, the Deutsche Clanliga (DeCL) founded in 1997 and modelled on the UKCL, and the ClanBase founded in 1998 and the only one of the three, which is still active in 2011.
- 2 LAN-parties (Local Area Network) and LAN-events are organised gatherings where gamers meet offline not necessarily to compete but to game together and to socialise. LAN-events are bigger in size and more commercialised than LAN-parties. By contrary, private LANs are meetings within a group of friends which are not public and usually take place at the private home of the gamers.
- 3 Gaming contexts are not pre-defined by the researcher. The term is used as an open concept for examining sets of practices and roles which can also be recognised by a third party as a context.
- 4 All quotes from interviews are translated from German. The only exception are the quotes from “pro-gamer female S”, those quotes are originally in English.
- 5 The term ‘boot camp’ refers within e-sport to offline meetings of gaming squads for training purposes. Usually, a boot camp lasts for a couple of days and gamers meet offline to train online. ‘Leisure gaming’ refers to gaming where having fun and gaming together is more important than preparing for a competition.
- 6 This refers to the discourse that there is a relationship between playing violent games and physical violence. In Germany this is an important discourse concerning video gaming. It also played a role in how the two school shootings which occurred in Germany were discussed.
- 7 This discourse is likely to change once games based on motion control systems are introduced into e-sport. Games based on motion control systems (e.g. Wii) could as soon as they are used within e-sport, re-create the need for gendered leagues and re-introduce discourses about the body, which are similar to the ones concerning physical sports.
- 8 The term ‘heterosexual’ is used here because female gamers understood as being attractive to male customers and as able to attract males to the exhibition stand.

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